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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000291

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [QA](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: C-NE7-01842: SAUDI-QATAR RELATIONS WARMING; WILL
IT LAST?

REF: SECSTATE 162695

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Saudi-Qatar relations appear to be warming, however, there is little evidence of long-term improvements. The Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) told PolOff during a February 13 meeting that Saudi-Qatar tensions are not played out in the GCC forum, and that although they may be present, the GCC does not deal with conflict. The Head of the GCC Department at the MFA similarly told PolOff during a February 18 meeting that Saudi-Qatar relations are cordial, but not warm. However, the GCC is not involved with these tensions, only the SAG directly. The SAG is aiming to send their ambassador to Doha within one month and does not feel that the recent opposition by Qatar to new regulations on satellite television will cause problems for the bilateral relations. The Deputy Chief of Mission at the Qatar Embassy in Riyadh also echoed this sentiment, but added that the Qatari embassy's presence in Riyadh is to appease the "big kid on the block" and does not deal with the SAG on an official basis. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) During a February 13 meeting with PolOff, Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs at the GCC

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Headquarters Dr. Abdulkarim al-Hamady told PolOff that the GCC is unaffected by any "real or perceived" tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, alluding to these tensions, al-Hamady emphasized that the GCC does not handle bilateral disputes. He acknowledged a GCC body that "technically exists" to handle issues with GCC member states, but he stated that this body is only on paper, as its "judges" are the GCC heads of state. Al-Hamady added that the GCC as a matter of policy avoids conflict and adopts "general-enough policies on major issues" so as not to cause any problems.

3. (C) The GCC position was largely echoed by Head of the GCC Department at the Saudi MFA Abdullah al-Shamarani during his February 18 meeting with PolOff. Al-Shamarani stated that Saudi-Qatar relations are good and are slowly improving through "proper channels." He said that a new ambassador has been appointed and will be posted to Doha most likely within one month. (Note: Media outlets reported an announcement of an ambassadorial appointment in early December 2007, but the SAG had not indicated when the posting would begin. There has not been a Saudi ambassador in Doha for more than five years. End Note.) According to al-Shamarani, the timing of the ambassador's Doha arrival signals "good will" from Saudi Arabia to improve relations, particularly in light of the upcoming 106th meeting of the GCC foreign ministers in Riyadh on March 1-2. Although he spoke very diplomatically about the SAG, al-Shamarani indicated that the bilateral

relationship is "cordial, not warm."

¶4. (C) Commenting on Qatar's opposition to new regulations on satellite television stations adopted by Arab ministers in Cairo on February 12, al-Shamarani said that the Qatari information minister was not even present at the meeting. (Note: This statement conflicts with media reports. According to Al-Hayat (02/13), the Qatari Information Minister was present, and stated he could not sign the regulations until higher Qatari officials reviewed it. End Note). Further, he said that it "did not matter" whether Qatar opposed these regulations because they are based upon basic principles in the GCC charter agreed by all GCC member states, including Qatar. He dismissed the notion that Qatar's decision would have any impact on current Saudi-Qatar relations. However, the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) and several local news agencies noted that Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television appeared to be the key target of these regulations. They also quoted an unnamed Qatari diplomat as saying, "Qatar's reservations on the document stemmed from that the document served primarily the interests of Saudi Arabia, which was behind the initiative to draft and implement it."

¶5. (SBU) Although Al-Jazeera -- a thorn in Saudi-Qatar relations -- recently made headway with Saudi Arabia, seemingly softening its position on the SAG and increasing its coverage of the Kingdom. Recent media reports noted Al-Jazeera has permission and plans to create a Riyadh bureau in the coming months. Despite these steps, the relationship seems to be backsliding.

¶6. (SBU) During recent live coverage of the rival faction gatherings in Lebanon on February 14, PolOff watched as Al-Jazeera television stated that the political crisis in Lebanon is really "a result of the standoff between the U.S.

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and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Syria and Iran on the other." The broadcasters repeated this sentiment, commenting negatively on the role of Saudi Arabia in Lebanese politics. Additionally, while showing the anti-Syrian majority March 14 leaders' speeches in memory of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the live broadcast switched between a single screen with the speaker to a tri-partite screen showing the speaker, his crowd, and the crowd forming in south Beirut. (Note: The funeral of assassinated Hizbollah figure Imad Mughniyeh was held on the same day in the largely Shia section of south Beirut. End Note.) While showing the crowd at Hariri's commemoration, Al-Jazeera only showed its edges, with only a handful of people. (Note: The other major international news networks showed the masses, estimated at over one million people, cheering and waving Lebanese flags. End Note.) While Saad Hariri, son of the former PM, spoke, Al-Jazeera showed a split screen with Hariri on the right and a photo of Mughniyeh on the left. This reporting of a regional crisis that the SAG is working very closely to resolve does not reflect that of an Al-Jazeera with good will towards Saudi Arabia.

¶7. (C) The Deputy Chief of Mission Abdullah al-Mansouri at the Qatar Embassy in Riyadh told PolOff on January 28 that Saudi-Qatar relations are somewhat "warming," but there has been "no actual change" in policy or action on the part of the SAG. He said that both governments will continue to "warm" relations because there are too many other important issues in the region and the GCC needs to be as strong and united as possible. He added, "in ten years' time, when the other regional conflicts are settled, we (the GOQ and SAG) can pick up this disagreement again."

¶8. (C) Al-Mansouri said that the Government of Qatar (GOQ) learned of the December 2007 announcement of a Saudi ambassadorial appointment to Doha through the media; to date, the SAG has not officially informed the GOQ of its intentions. However, the GOQ wants a Saudi ambassador in

Doha as soon as possible. According to al-Mansouri, the Qatari ambassador has been in Riyadh for twelve years, and will remain until a Saudi ambassador arrives in Doha. Al-Mansouri said that he has heard unofficially from the SAG that the ambassador will be the current Consul General in Dubai.

¶9. (C) When asked why the GOQ maintains an embassy in Riyadh, al-Mansouri replied that Saudi Arabia, and King Abdullah in particular, is the "big kid on the block." Qatar cannot afford to isolate itself from the SAG, and it does not want to aggravate the already-tense situation. He remarked that the GOQ keeps a small embassy in Riyadh, has "cordial-- if very tense and unofficial" relations, and avoids all serious areas of discussion-- leaving those topics for the GCC forum. According to al-Mansouri, Iran is Qatar's biggest regional issue of concern, but the GOQ will only discuss it with the SAG in the context of the GCC. Al-Mansouri said that within the GCC, the GOQ feels secure enough to raise serious issues and even challenge the SAG when it disagrees with Saudi policy.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: While most signs point to a thawing of relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it seems as though it is partially superficial and may not last. If the Saudi Ambassador does arrive in Doha prior to the March GCC meeting, or even the Arab League Summit, it would demonstrate good will on the part of the SAG and could go far in improving relations. That being said, however, Al-Jazeera's continued "biased" reporting on the Kingdom, especially in light of the recent adoption of Arab League regulations on satellite television channels and Qatar's rejection of these regulations, could tarnish the positive movement in bilateral relations. END COMMENT.
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